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Newport, R.I.**

Expeditionary Strike Group: Give Way Carrier Strike Group

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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23 April 2008

Abstract

Expeditionary Strike Group: Give Way Carrier Strike Group

The Expeditionary Strike Group provides the Joint Force Commander with an asset that is unmatched by any other force: an air, sea, and land force ready to be and remain on station to execute missions throughout the range of military operations within the joint, interagency, and coalition environment. The United States Navy touts the Nimitz Class Super Carrier and its Carrier Strike Group as the most powerful weapon within its arsenal. The Carrier Strike Group is a powerful force optimally employed to fight high intensity, traditional operations. However, as the new Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower states, “the United States and its partners find themselves competing for global influence in an era in which they are unlikely to be fully at war or fully at peace.” The United States must always be prepared to conduct conventional, traditional combat operations, and the Carrier Strike Group has no peer in those operations, but the time has come to recognize the change in the potential adversary. This environment necessitates the reemergence of the amphibious, naval forces, embodied in the Expeditionary Strike Group, as the United States Navy’s preeminent force. Why then does the perception still exist that the Expeditionary Strike Group is a less capable than the Carrier Strike Group?

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The future force must be more finely tailored, more accessible to the joint commander and better configured to operate with other agencies and international partners in complex operations... It must be trained, ready to operate and able to make decisions in traditionally non-military areas.

– 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Report

INTRODUCTION

The Expeditionary Strike Group provides the Joint Force Commander with an asset that is unmatched by any other force: an air, sea, and land force ready to be and remain on station to execute missions throughout the range of military operations within the joint, interagency, and coalition environment. The United States Navy touts the Nimitz Class Super Carrier and its Carrier Strike Group as the most powerful weapon within its arsenal. The Carrier Strike Group is a powerful force optimally employed to fight high intensity, traditional operations. However, “the United States and its partners find themselves competing for global influence in an era in which they are unlikely to be fully at war or fully at peace.”¹ The United States must always be prepared to conduct conventional, traditional combat operations, and the Carrier Strike Group has no peer in those operations, but the time has come to recognize the change in the potential adversary. This environment necessitates the reemergence of the amphibious, naval forces, embodied in the Expeditionary Strike Group, as the United States Navy’s preeminent force. Why then does the perception still exist that the Expeditionary Strike Group is a less capable than the Carrier Strike Group?

This examination of the advocacy for a reemergence and refocusing the U.S. Navy’s efforts toward the amphibious, naval, Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) begins with a look at where the ESG came from and why it was developed. Once the origins are explained, an analysis of the capabilities the ESG brings to the Joint Force Commander (JFC) is

¹ Commandant of the Marine Corps, Chief of Naval Operations, Commandant of the Coast Guard, “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower,” (Washington, DC, October 2007), 1

undertaken. Those capabilities span from what it provides when fully at war to fully at peace. Next is an explanation of how exploiting the capabilities of the ESG to its full potential ultimately develops domain awareness of the JFC's joint operating area (JOA). Following the discussion of the capabilities, benefits, and strengths the ESG presents to the JFC, the argument is presented that espouses remaining focused on the CSG because of the overwhelming power it provides to the JFC. As former Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Vern Clark states in *Sea Power 21: Projecting Decisive Joint Capabilities*, "Carrier Strike Groups will remain the core of our Navy's warfighting strength. No other force package will come close to matching their sustained power projection ability, extended situational awareness, and combat survivability."² Finally, conclusions are drawn that illustrate why the ESG should reemerge as the U.S. Navy's preeminent force and recommendations suggested to foster that reemergence.

BACKGROUND

This concept calls for more widely distributed forces to provide increased forward presence, security cooperation with an expanding set of international partners, preemption of non-traditional threats, and global response to crises in regions around the world where access might be difficult.

– Admiral Michael G. Mullen, Chief of Naval Operations and General Michael W. Hagee, Commandant of the Marine Corps, 2006 Naval Operations Concept

Since the inception of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps, there have always been Marines embarked aboard Navy ships projecting power abroad. The Navy conducted expeditionary operations to protect the new nation's commercial shipping and establish American presence around the globe. The heyday of the Navy-Marine Corps team occurred during World War II as they conducted amphibious operations to seize and defend advanced

² Vernon E. Clark, "Sea Power 21: Projecting Decisive Joint Capabilities," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 128, Iss.10 (October 2002) 32.

naval bases in support of the Fleet Commander's Pacific Campaign. In these operations, the Navy and Marine Corps combined amphibious ships with surface combatants to create a force that could conduct forcible entry and sustain operations ashore. The surface combatants provided protection to the amphibious fleet and fire support for the landing force. During this period and into the Cold War, the aircraft carrier and the carrier battle group became the dominant platform within the U.S. Navy as the Navy prepared to face the Soviet Union in a force-on-force massive, conventional naval battle. Because of the advent of nuclear weapons, some viewed amphibious operations as obsolete and the amphibious, or "Gator Navy," developed as a separate community. The Gator Navy took a back seat to the principal Cold Warriors, the carrier battle group and the nuclear submarine force as "American military leaders abandoned its small war imperial tradition and focused doctrine and procurement toward large-scale conventional warfare."³ Amphibious operations were not a significant part of this warfare. Thus, the Marine Corps developed the concept of expeditionary maneuver warfare, which seeks to avoid enemy strengths, and strike where the enemy is weakest. Now, the Navy's maritime supremacy enables this concept of expeditionary maneuver warfare. Ensuring freedom of movement at sea and in the littorals allows the amphibious force to strike at the time and place of their choosing. The Marine Expeditionary Unit / Amphibious Readiness Group (MEU/ARG) repeatedly exercised this concept – making it a core capability. Such a capability offered the Regional Commander-in-Chief a flexible, responsive, and agile combined arms force capable of seizing and defending advanced ports and airfields for follow-on forces to conduct large land campaigns as well as other traditional MEU/ARG missions.

³ Daryl R. Hancock, "Expeditionary Strike Group: New Label, or New Concept – for Future Naval Warriors of America's Small Wars?" (research paper, Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Department, 2003), 12.

The end of the Cold War changed the global security environment. The dominant position of the U.S. caused a proliferation of potential adversaries and radically changed their tactics. U.S. adversaries were no longer able to attack the U.S. military force-on-force, but instead developed asymmetric approach to avoid our strengths and exploit our relative weaknesses, a fact which has not gone unnoticed.⁴ The *Naval Operations Concept* (NOC) notes that, “in recent years, our Sailors and Marines have been committed to a wide variety of missions outside the realm of traditional combat operations, a trend that is expected to increase in the years ahead.”⁵ Additionally, the USMC’s *Long War* states, “eight years into the 21st Century, these irregular security threats are increasingly more the norm than the exception.”⁶ These thoughts echo what the Navy-Marine Corps was thinking when they decided to initiate the ESG proof of concept in November of 2002.⁷ The Navy and Marine Corps created the Expeditionary Strike Group understanding the nature of current and future challenges the U.S. will face in executing the Global War on Terror with limited assets and a seemingly unlimited number of adversaries across the globe. A restructuring of forces that redistributes surface combatants and submarines allows the Naval Services to present the Joint Chiefs of Staff with twelve CSGs and twelve ESGs providing increased presence, protection, flexibility, and responsiveness to JFCs.⁸

⁴ President of the United States of America, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC, The White House, 16 March 2006), 2-3.

⁵ Commandant of the Marine Corps, Chief of Naval Operations, Naval Operations Concept -2006, (Washington, DC, 2006), 10.

⁶ U.S. Marine Corps, The Long War – Send in the Marines: A Marine Corps Operational Employment Concept to Meet an Uncertain Security Environment, (Washington, DC, Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 28 January 2008), 4.

⁷ Timothy G. Callahan, “Expeditionary Strike Group Operations,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 90 (March 2006), 26.

⁸ Vernon E. Clark, Admiral, U.S. Navy, interview with Gordon I. Peterson (2002), paraphrased from Gordon I. Peterson, “A Clear, Concise, and Powerful Navy Vision,” *Sea Power*, Vol. 45, No. 10 (October 2002), 53.

CAPABILITIES AVAILABLE TO THE JOINT FORCE COMMANDER

To be effective in this [current threat] environment, combatant commanders require tools that are not only instruments of war, but implements for stability, security, and reconstruction in our global neighborhood.

– Admiral Michael Mullen, Former Chief of Naval Operations

Each of the twelve ESGs present JFCs with versatile, agile, and responsive forces capable of successfully executing missions across the ROMO, a feat the CSG is incapable of accomplishing. The ESG is a potent, multi-functional tool that has the unique characteristic of optimal performance when fully at war and fully at peace. With surface, subsurface, air, land, special operations capable (SOC) forces and special forces (SOF), the ESG arrives on-station ready to face any challenge. The ESG staff is able to accept operational direction and translate it into tactical missions. In this capacity, the staff provides the JFC with experienced planners who can plan multiple; complex missions including surface, subsurface, air and land operations simultaneously.⁹ The ESG provides the JFC with a force that is as proficient at theater security cooperation as it is at peace operations and major combat operations. The ESG can fight its way in with strike aircraft and missiles followed by amphibious assault or it can come ashore with a handshake, a smile, and a “Salam, aleykum.”¹⁰ Drawing upon its MEU/ARG experience, the ESG is confident and comfortable working with interagency and coalition partners in operations such as non-combatant evacuation operations and bilateral and multilateral coalition exercises such as Partnership for Peace exercises. The most potent capability the ESG provides the JFC is the MEU. This combined arms force provides the JFC with “boots on the deck,” the human face that can

⁹ Jason Heavner, “Navy’s First Trained Expeditionary Strike Group Deploys from San Diego,” Navy.mil, 26 August 2003, https://navhome.news.navy.mil/search/print.asp?stoey_id=9213&VIRIN=9170&imagetype (accessed 7 March 2008).

¹⁰ A common Arabic greeting.

deter those who wish to do us harm, dissuade potential adversaries from choosing the wrong path, assure our friends and allies, and defeat the enemy when required. With its surface combatants and submarine, the ESG is able to establish maritime domain security for those amphibious forces to conduct whatever mission the JFC asks. “No more responsive, no more lethal force provides America’s leaders with such a powerful range of options than the Navy-Marine Corps Team.”¹¹ That team is best exemplified by the ESG.

FULLY AT WAR

During major combat operations the ESG’s surface combatants provide maritime security and missile defense. By leveraging the sea’s maneuver space, the supporting fires of the surface combatants and strike aircraft, the ESG is able to overcome access denial. MEUs secure an airfield as was the case when Joint Task Force – 58 seized the Kandahar Airport for follow-on forces in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The MEU is also capable of seizing ports to support the off-load of maritime prepositioned ships (MPS) and, again, acceptance of follow-on forces. The MEU is also available for tasking as an additional maneuver element or as the JFC’s theater reserve. ESG Marines in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom have recently executed both of those missions.

ENABLING FUNCTIONS

As stated above, the ESG is a versatile, experienced, and knowledgeable organization highly capable of conducting rapid planning and quickly executing missions. Falling in on the MEU/ARG’s rapid response planning process (R2P2), the ESG receives a mission from the JFC, analyses it and quickly produces tactical tasks for the MEU/ARG. With all of the assets within the ESG, the staff is proficient in sea, land, and air operations making it an ideal

¹¹ U.S. Marine Corps, Marine Corps Concepts and Programs – 2007 (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 2007), 6.

staff to stand-up a limited duration JTF, a JTF(FORWARD) or JTF enabler, until a deliberate JTF can be formed and sent to relieve it. When the ESG is operating in the JOA as a JTF(FWD) it is able to develop situational awareness while the deliberate JTF is forming. Not having to build its situational awareness from scratch saves the JTF valuable time and lives in a crisis. The ESG staff has been employed and proven as a JTF enabler most recently during the Lebanon non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO), and Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster Relief (HA/DR) in Pakistan and Indonesia. Once again falling back on the MEU/ARG base, the ESG is comfortable and experienced interacting and working with the Department of State (DOS), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and other interagency organizations. In coordination with the MEU Forward Command Element (FCE), key members of the ESG staff receive training from the DOS regarding how to interact with DOS personnel, if required, as advance party liaison officers.

The ESG carries with it the ability to establish a port or beachhead, allowing the JFC to call-forward the Maritime Prepositioned Force (MPF) and the associated Marine Expeditionary Brigade. This capability is literally a force multiplier giving the JFC a forcible entry capability and a combined arms force capable of sustaining itself for thirty days. When the JFC is done with that force, it embarks MPS and amphibious ships. This allows the JFC to quickly land and quickly extract forces before a crisis becomes a contingency.

If two crises occur simultaneously or nearly simultaneously, the ESG has the wherewithal to plan, task organize and respond to each crisis with a tailored package to support the needs. In 2004, ESG-5 displayed this ability by providing foreign humanitarian assistance in support of tsunami relief operations in Banda Aceh Province and mainland Indonesia at the same time. The ESG was able to detach one amphibious ship and one

surface combatant to support operations in Banda Aceh while the remainder of the ESG provided support to other major cities Indonesia.¹² Successfully executing both operations had a remarkable impact on world opinion of the U.S.

The final aspect of the ESG's staff and enabling functions to discuss is their habitual regional relationship with Fleet and Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCC). These relationships allow the ESG Commander and staff to better understand commander's intent and maintain regional awareness. The East Coast ESGs habitually work with 2nd, 6th and 5th, if required, Fleets and U.S. European Command, U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Central Command while West Coast ESGs habitually work with 3rd, 7th and 5th Fleets and U.S. Pacific Command, U.S. Central Command, and U.S. Africa Command. ESG staffs conduct conferences with countries in these areas to coordinate training exercises as well as maintaining relationships with port and DOS officials for port-calls.

The NOC highlights the enabling functions deployed ESGs bring to the JFCs. "Our forward forces will be first on the scene in an emerging crisis and will provide key enabling capabilities for other government and private organizations and the introduction of follow-on forces and resources. They may also assume or facilitate joint or combined task force command responsibilities."¹³

ROMO SALAD

While we must remain ready to carry out major combat operations against conventional forces, the future holds a greater likelihood of irregular wars fought in urban environments, against enemies that rely on asymmetric tactics and weapons.

– Marine Corps Concepts and Programs

¹² J. A. Owens, telephone call with author, 9 April 2008. (Note: Gunnery Sergeant Owens served as the Logistics Chief, 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (SOC), Expeditionary Strike Group-5)

¹³ Naval Operations Concept, 12

The range of military operations (ROMO) covers major operations on one end and routine, recurring military activities on the other end.¹⁴ Between the two extremes, there are no clear dividing lines to inform Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coastguardsmen exactly where they are so they can devise the perfect response. The mid-spectrum operations may blend into each other so that troops are conducting multiple operations at the same time. For example, Marines can teach foreign militaries how to conduct urban operations while the surface combatants train with foreign navies at sea. The ESG trains for specific operations during its work-up cycle. The specific capabilities described below are unique and inherent to the ESG and are what makes the ESG the most potent force available to the JFC.

Surface combatants, amphibious ships, jets, attack and assault support helicopters and the MEU Maritime Special Purpose Force (MSPF) make up some of the assets that work together to conduct maritime interdiction operations (MIO) or more specifically what the MEU refers to as visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) operations. These operations include permissive and semi-permissive ship boarding if ships are acting contrary to the law of the sea or are under pirate control. MIO also include securing gas/oil platforms (GOPLATS) from adversaries. “The recent capture of Somali pirate vessels by Expeditionary Strike Group EIGHT demonstrates [the ESG’s] commitment to ensuring freedom of the seas against an expanding number of irregular threats.”¹⁵ Within the JOA, it allows the freedom of navigation for commercial shipping to sustain the global economy. MIO/VBSS capabilities provide the JFC the ability to combat piracy and terrorism at sea.

¹⁴ Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Operations, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, December 2006), I-7.

¹⁵ Naval Operations Concept, 14

Regularly rehearsing and exercising non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO), the ESG is prepared to execute this mission at the JFC's direction. When training for this mission, leaders simulate the required interaction with embassy staff for conducting NEOs. When possible, ESGs include DOS personnel to build familiarity and trust between the two agencies. Like the MIO/VBSS, NEOs can require the strength of the entire ESG, ships, aircraft, Marines and Sailors. Having the NEO force afloat allows the JFC to respond quickly when directed to execute that operation. NEO forces can insert and extract American citizens and third country nationals, as directed by the ambassador, via surface, air, or a combination of air and surface. ESG forces train and prepare to execute a NEO in permissive, semi-permissive and non-permissive environments. In the latter two, Marines are required for security of the evacuees. Those Marines come from the only afloat force with Marines, the ESG. The ESG NEO force, reinforced with additional assets, executed the 2006 Lebanon evacuation. Combined Task Force – 59 (CTF-59), comprised of “elements of the IWO JIMA Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) diverted from the Red Sea to aggregate with USS MOUNT WHITNEY, USS GONZALEZ, USS TRENTON, USS BARRY, and the high speed vessel SWIFT in the Mediterranean in order to evacuate thousands of American citizens from war-torn Lebanon.”¹⁶ Designated as the Commander, CTF-59, the ESG Commander, Brigadier General Carl Jensen, assumed control when directed; commenced operations and when the deliberate staff arrived, handed operations over to Vice Admiral J. Stufflebeem who assumed the duties as Commander, Joint Task Force Lebanon.¹⁷

¹⁶ Naval Operations Concept, 13

¹⁷ Eric Brown, “JFT Lebanon Assumes Responsibility for ‘Strengthen Hope’ Operations,” Navy.mil, 24 August 2006, https://navcms.news.navy.mil/search/print.asp?story_id=25240&VIRIN=38200&imagetype, (accessed 5 March 2008)

When the ESG is in the JOA, the JFC has an added force protection asset called the TRAP force (Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel). Additionally, the Marine Special Operations Company assigned to the ESG is qualified for in-extremis hostage rescue. The designated TRAP force trains, exercises and is evaluated prior to deployment. Both forces are capable of air and surface insert and extract presenting multiple options to the JFC. The ESG possesses organic aviation and surface assets requiring no outside assistance, within operational ranges of aircraft or surface assets. The MEU/ARG TRAP force are the Marines who rescued U.S. Air Force Captain Scott O'Grady when his aircraft crashed in Bosnia in 1995. Having this capability allows the JFC to accept more risk knowing that, if required, a force is readily available that is capable of recovering individuals and high value equipment. This force also gives flight crews and all those operating in the JOA the confidence that the JFC will take all efforts to secure their safe return.

Another recent ESG capability receiving significant public attention is the Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster Relief (HA/DR) force. In 2004, the BONHOMME RICHARD ESG (ESG-5) conducted HA/DR operations in Indonesia in support of tsunami relief efforts. The ESG inserted a liaison element into Indonesia to coordinate with local civilian authorities and non-governmental organizations to begin assessing the situation. Due to Indonesian political concerns, the local authorities requested the ESG to return to their ships each evening to minimize the U.S. presence on the ground. The ships were full of relief supplies brought onboard prior to the ESG leaving Guam. Not able to get into the devastated areas farther inland because of road damage and debris, the ESG's substantial helicopter assets conducted relief efforts inland while amphibious landing craft transported

supplies to the coastal areas – again displaying the versatility of the ESG.¹⁸ Working in concert with other U.S. forces, DOS, the host nation (HN) government and military, and NGOs, the ESG gave the JFC a force capable of putting “boots on the deck” to assist a nation in need. This assisted the JFC in keeping the JOA secure and stabile in a time of chaos.

Above all others, the greatest capability the ESG provides to the JFC is the ability to conduct theater security cooperation (TSC). This is the most frequent mission the JFC tasks the ESG with executing, often taking place in the form of bilateral or multilateral training exercises, this has long been a core competency of the MEU/ARG. Marines training with ground and aviation elements of foreign militaries and ships training alongside foreign navies develops and assures our friends that the U.S. is committed to a peaceful, mutually beneficial relationship while showing potential adversaries that an attack against one threatens retaliation from many. Face-to-face interaction is a key to all relationships. Establishing personal relationships throughout the JOA assists in maintaining a stable environment and keeps dialogue open between leaders. An example of the capability and flexibility the ESG provides the JFC comes from the most recent BOXER ESG deployment in 2006. While part of 7th Fleet, transiting the PACOM JOA, the BOXER ESG planned and executed three simultaneous TSC missions in Sri Lanka, India and Maldives. Conducting split-ESG operations, the ESG sent one amphibious ship escorted by a surface combatant to support the Maldives exercise while the remaining ships deployed Marines in Sri Lanka then conducted Exercise Malabar with the Indian Navy. Once all exercises were complete, the ESG re-aggregated and transited to the 5th Fleet, CENTCOM JOA for combat operations in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Working with these three nations created personal and

¹⁸ J. A. Owens, telephone call with author, 9 April 2008.

professional relationships that will be valuable in the future. TSC operations support the JFC's ability to "counter ideological support for terrorism."¹⁹

The capabilities described above exist nowhere else in the U.S. military. No other force is as agile and able to remain on-station for extended periods as the ESG. No other naval forces is as proficient, tested, and proven in operations across the ROMO. While other naval forces may be more capable in one or two operations, the ESG possesses a skill level in all operations that provides the JFC with a ready, forward deployed, self-sustaining forces that can operate in the air, on and under the sea, and on land.

FULLY AT PEACE

Unfortunately, today's young Sailors and Marines are unfamiliar with a United States fully at peace and even more unfortunately, they likely will not know that state in the near future.²⁰ Today's men and women, the heart and soul of the ESG are, however, comfortable and extremely proficient operating in that risky environment where they train and build relationships in areas of the world where the U.S. has many enemies. Those young Sailors and Marines of the ESG complete that task at their own risk and do so willingly. They conduct this training and relationship building in the knowledge that what they are doing today helps global stability and could very well preclude them from having to be fully at war in the future.

DOMAIN AWARENESS

Should peacetime operations transition to war, maritime forces will have already developed the environmental and operational understanding and experience to quickly engage in combat operations."

– A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower

¹⁹ Department of Defense, The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC, Office of the Secretary of Defense March 2005), 11.

²⁰ Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower, 1

Domain awareness, both maritime and land, provide a vision of the JOA ensuring the JFC is able to make informed decision concerning where best to employ the limited assets available. With this enhanced awareness, the JFC can choose to surge forces ashore when required to conduct TSC operations to create conditions that may help stabilize a developing crisis. The unique and most valuable piece the ESG provides is the land domain awareness provided by the MEU. While in contact with MEU forces ashore, the JFC can gauge if he needs to call forward the CSG or MPF in the event the situation worsens. While interacting with local military forces, governments, civilian populations, Department of State (DOS) Teams, and NGOs/IGOs, the Marines develop the relationships needed to provide the JFC with an accurate barometer of how a nation is functioning and the stability of the region. While the surface and amphibious ships are off the coast they are developing and maintaining maritime domain awareness through intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance for the JFC through their systems and through training exercises with foreign navies. The ESG capabilities described above, specifically those short of combat operations, provide the JFC with information concerning nations or regions from the maritime and land perspective. Technology has incredible potential and utility, but the face-to-face interaction between human beings is what makes the ESG valuable to developing domain awareness.

“WHERE’S THE CARRIER?”

“Carrier Strike Groups will remain the core of our Navy’s warfighting strength.”
– Admiral Vernon Clark, Former Chief of Naval Operations

In a 2003 *Sea Power* magazine article, the editor-in-chief states, “The Navy’s carrier battle groups – supported by logistics ships of the Military Sealift Command – are the most flexible instruments of military power immediately available to the Commander-in-Chief, a

truth verified time and again over the last six decades.”²¹ Today’s Carrier Strike Group offers the JFC an overwhelming power projection platform that has no peer and is unmatched in history. The strike capability of the CSG’s approximately forty-four F/A-18s projects devastating effects deep into enemy territory while retaining the capability to provide precision close air support. The deterrence capacity of the CSG is documented and potent. Knowing a CSG is located off their shore; potential adversaries must reexamine their intent, often this results in a de-escalation of the situation.

No doubt exists about the overwhelming power the CSG brings to the JOA; however, the CSG remains limited to Cold War missions – large-scale, conventional warfare. As stated in A Cooperative Strategy for the 21st Century, “adversaries are unlikely to attempt conventional force-on-force conflict.”²² While the JFC must have the capability to fight large-scale conventional warfare that is just one part of the ROMO, a more multi-function asset is more valuable. As Admiral Mullen stated, “to be effective in this environment, combatant commanders require tools that are not only instruments of war, but implements for stability, security, and reconstruction in our global neighborhood.”²³ The CSG can dominate at one end of the ROMO, but has significantly less capability to conduct operations such as HA/DR, TSC, and NEO. When considering the CSG’s deterrence effect, examine if it is better to have to deter with a CSG or to preempt that requirement by placing Marines on the deck to conduct TSC operations near the potential adversary. The CSG operates to its full potential in major combat operations, not simply sitting as a deterrent. ESG’s can maximize their potential while conducting operations across the ROMO, which are capable of deterring

²¹ James D. Hessman, “A Vision of Continuing Excellence,” *Sea Power*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January 2003), 6.

²² *Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, 14

²³ Michael Mullen, “What I Believe,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 132, Iss. 1 (January 2006), 13.

adversaries as well. Additionally, CSGs can only effectively provide deterrence in one place at a time because there is only one aircraft carrier. ESGs can conduct split-ESG operations by placing attack aircraft on all three amphibious ships. While the CSG is a dominating force, the ESG provides the JFC the flexibility, agility, and responsiveness to conduct operations across the entire ROMO, not just one end. “For far too long and in far too many ways, it has been about big ship battles and high-tech weapons systems. Life is just not that simple anymore.”²⁴

CONCLUSIONS

The Navy and Marine Corps team provides Combatant Commanders with access, mobility, staying power, and a mix of capabilities that uniquely contribute to meeting [the] evolving operational requirements.

– Naval Operations Concept

Expeditionary amphibious operations are the heritage of the Navy; they are the backbone and reason the Navy/Marine Corps team was born and must remain the reason it grows today. Examining the capabilities the ESG highlights the flexibility, responsiveness, and power the ESG present to the JFC. The JFC can use the ESG as a tool to address any of the myriad of challenges presented across the ROMO. The CSG simply is not able to address all of those situations that fall into the “ROMO Salad”. Analyzing how the ESG contributes to the JFC’s domain awareness brings a realization that the Sailors and Marines on the deck provide the JFC more meaningful information concerning his JOA than any technical systems can. No other Navy force can provide “boots on the deck” establishing and building personal and professional relationships that ultimately build the JFC’s domain awareness. The Expeditionary Strike Group is an incredibly powerful, highly flexible, and responsive force that traces its origins to the birth of the Naval Service. It is as relevant

²⁴ Mullen, 13

today as it was in 1775 and must reemerge within the Navy as the preeminent expeditionary force.

RECOMMENDATIONS

*“Rhetoric is no substitute for action, and action is no substitute for success” -
National Strategy for Maritime Security*

For the ESG to reemerge as a preeminent fighting force in the U.S. Navy, the Navy must address two issues: perception and priority. The Navy must examine the service culture that has evolved in which the aircraft carrier and her CSG are valued above all other forces and commands. The nature of today’s conflict is asymmetric, not conventional; therefore, the Navy must not let that focus dominate its culture. “Transformation is not only about technology. It is also about.... Refocusing capabilities to meet future challenges, not those we are already most prepared to meet.”²⁵ The Navy’s culture has not embraced the Naval publications and statements made by senior leaders with regards to a change in focus. The Navy must make a concerted effort to refocus on their naval character and all of the missions that accompany that. A focus on the entire ROMO is sure to enlighten those who believe the ESG is just “old amphibians” with additional surface ships. Secondly, to reinforce the belief in the preeminence of the ESG, the Navy must designate the ESG as a priority for institutional efforts, to include budgeting for all thirty-three amphibious ships required; dedicate funding to upgrading systems aboard ESG shipping concurrent with or before the CSG.

“Transformation requires difficult programmatic and organizational choices. We will need to divest in some areas and invest in others.”²⁶ The Navy can accept the risk of divesting in the CSG and invest in the ESG. Finally, the Navy must take heed of what high-ranking officer

²⁵ National Defense Strategy, 13

²⁶ National Defense Strategy, 13

stated, “We do not want to be dominant, but irrelevant.” The ESG will never be irrelevant because it is able to combat situations across the range of military operations.

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